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RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7628
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0111
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 5912
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2043
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0162
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002792

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#) [MY](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN THAILAND: MALAYSIAN PM NAJIB WADES INTO
THE SOUTHERN THAILAND AUTONOMY BRIAR PATCH

REF: A. CHIANGMAI 145 (PM PUSHES SECRET DIALOGUE)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2644 (CHAVALIT)

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 1508 (JUNE 8 MOSQUE ATTACK AND REPRISALS)

BANGKOK 00002792 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: When it comes to discussing the insurgency-related violence in Thailand's majority ethnic Malay Muslim Deep South provinces, two of the most sensitive issues are suggestions of outside involvement and proposals for autonomy. Armed with an invitation from Thai PM Abhisit to make a joint visit to the Deep South later this year, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak took advantage of his visit to Thailand in late October for the ASEAN Summit to suggest to several Thai newspapers that some form of autonomy for Thailand's Muslim-majority southern provinces could serve as a possible solution to the violence that has claimed almost four thousand lives since 2004. Najib emphasized that would ultimately be a decision that Bangkok, and not Kuala Lumpur, must make and that Malaysia would not interfere in Thailand's internal issues or support insurgents who were breaking Thai laws.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Najib's upcoming joint visit to the Deep South is likely seen by Abhisit as a follow-on to a similar joint visit by then PMs Mahathir and Chuan, Abhisit's mentor, to the Deep South in the late 1990s which gave a boost to peace process efforts. Mahathir used that visit to tell ethnic Malay Muslims in Thailand that if Malays could live peacefully in a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional Malaysia, so could Malay Muslims in Thailand. Many Thai continue to have a positive opinion of Mahathir for this notable contribution to Thai interests. The lack of negative feedback over Najib's foray into a domestic Thai issue, at a time when Cambodian PM Hun Sen was the source of much ridicule for his domestic-related meddling on behalf of fugitive ex PM Thaksin, is notable and should be seen in this context.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment, cont: Despite growing support among academics and some political players--including Abhisit--for enhanced participation and local governance in the South, the word "autonomy" remains a semantic red line for the Thai government. Najib's use of the word "autonomy" was likely an unfortunate semantic slip of the tongue, though at least one

close observer of the south suggested to us that given the long history of Thai-Malaysian discussions and awareness of sensitivities around the issue, Najib may have intended to push Abhisit along on Abhisit's stated intent to move forward in meeting the aspirations of local residents for a greater voice. At the heart of the matter is the (re)definition of what it means to be a Thai citizen, both for the Thai Government and for Malay Muslims in the Deep South. Willingness by both sides to continue the dialogue brokered by the Henri Dumont Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) is a positive indicator (REF A), but a lasting solution remains elusive. End Summary and Comment.

NAJIB USES THE "A" WORD

¶4. (U) In the runup to the October 23-24 ASEAN Summit, the Royal Thai Government (RTG) announced that PM Abhisit and Malaysian PM Najib would make a joint visit to southern Thailand in December; the visit carries obvious echoes of a similar visit a decade ago by the two PM's mentors, then-Thai PM Chuan and then-Malaysian PM Mahathir. PM Najib gave several interviews to Thai media during the summit in which he was quoted as saying Thailand should offer a certain degree of autonomy to the people in Thailand's predominantly Muslim Malay southern provinces. Najib emphasized that the decision of how to implement increased local participation was entirely up to the Thai Government, and that Malaysia would not intervene. A Thai Government spokesperson acknowledged Najib's statement and said the government supports an approach allowing for more public participation in the form of a local assembly.

BANGKOK 00002792 002.2 OF 002

¶5. (SBU) NOTE: Najib's press comments and planned visit come at the same time the new chairman of the opposition Puea Thai party GEN. Chavalit has announced plans to visit the Deep South and Malaysia as part of his diplomatic offensive intended to put pressure on the Abhisit government (REF B). End Note.

REACTION: LOW-KEY, BUT WELCOMED

¶5. (C) The lack of any notable negative feedback to the leader of a neighboring country wading into a sensitive domestic political matter was noteworthy. Human Rights Watch's Sunai Phasuk said that he talked to dozens of prominent Thai and Malay Muslims after Najib's comments, and he was somewhat surprised at the lack of a strong reaction. Both Sunai and Don Pathan, a writer for The Nation newspaper and a regular Embassy contact with good sources within the insurgent movement, suggested Malay Muslims in southern Thailand viewed Najib's statements as encouragement from Malaysia--who the insurgents tend to perceive as advocates for their perspective--for the movement to engage in dialogue with the Thai government, according to our contacts.

¶6. (C) Don Pathan suggested Najib's comments could be a significant step in getting the insurgents and the RTG together to end the violence; Pathan told us that key Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN-C) leaders were prepared to join Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) representatives in secret peace talks with the Abhisit government earlier in 2009, but balked after the shooting at the Al Furqon mosque in June (REF C). Not all of Najib's comments went over well, however, according to Pathan, who indicated PULO leaders in exile were upset that some of Najib's remarks implied they were not good Muslims. They also resent the emphasis on Islam that Najib, the Thai government, and others have placed in characterizing a conflict which the insurgents themselves define as ethno-nationalist rather than religious.

AT ISSUE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE THAI?

17. (C) The crux of the matter for many on both sides of the conflict is national identity and what it means to be a Thai citizen. Don Pathan wrote in The Nation on October 27 that granting autonomy to the Malay Muslims in the South would essentially acknowledge that they have a different history and culture from the country's majority Siamese Buddhists, an alien concept to Thai nationalists. On the other hand, accepting a form of autonomy rather than independence would imply recognition by the insurgents of the Thai state's legitimacy.

JOHN